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Revealing and Reckoning: Curating Place-Responsive Performance on Country

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Revealing and Reckoning: Curating Place-Responsive Performance on Country

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Abstract

From engaging in a practice of site-specific performance, the author has in recent years also branched into curating place-responsive performance events. This expansion of Taylor's practice has grown out of her seeking to represent more about the place than is possible to draw out in her own work, because places are inherently multi-layered, experienced through many different bodies and perspectives, and are continually being reconstrued by the people who inhabit them. To represent to some extent this multiplicity, Taylor invites diverse artists to respond to the site or place, which in Australia is always situated on Country.

Country is the way Australia's First Nations people conceive of land, sea and sky. It is only in recent years that Australians have collectively begun to conceive of a sense of place that is based upon Indigenous presence and culture. As a nation, Australia is still absorbing this reality, following two centuries of denial based on the British settler-colonial fallacy of *terra nullius* – the premise of an “empty land” upon which invasion was justified. Such paradigm altering requires much reckoning with place. This paper proposes that live site-responsive performance events might contribute to this reckoning.

Drawing upon the author's curatorial projects in Victoria, Australia, this paper discusses the effects of foregrounding relationships between place, body and identity in performance events on Country. Through their varied responses, curated artists bring audiences/participants' attention to sensory, historical, environmental and cultural qualities of the place. Through the haptic, kinaesthetic and conceptual engagement that the artists invite, audiences become more conscious of their individual and collective embodied presence in the place. Bringing together First Nations custodians, diverse contemporary artists and community groups, these curated events offer approaches to understanding and fostering a sense of place that is tangibly felt by the audience/participants.

Keywords: curation, Australian performance, site-specific performance, colonial history, Indigenous culture and Country.

Country and Reckoning

Based in Naarm/Melbourne, as a non-Indigenous Australian artist, I have developed a site-specific dance and performance practice I call *locating* (Taylor, 2009). I have in recent years also branched into curating place-responsive performance events. Whenever I create or curate work in so-called Australia, it is always on Country.

Country is the way Australia's First Nations people conceive of land, sea and sky. Dharug Knowledge holder, Associate Professor Liz Cameron (2020) explained:

Country refers to the area of land of a certain Aboriginal Nation (*Dharug Country, Gunditjmarra Country*, etc.); hence there are hundreds of 'Countries' within Australia. Country is also used to (...) refer to the environment or land including the interdependent relationships between animals, people, vegetation and spirits, the earth beneath the surface and the air above it, and the complex interactivity of all of these. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law, each person is entrusted with the cultural experience and responsibility to care for their Country. (p. 5)

Absurdly yet tragically, in Australia it is only in the last decade or two that we have collectively begun to realise a sense of place that is based upon - or even includes - Indigenous presence and culture (which holds Country at its core). As a nation we are still absorbing this "new" reality, following over two centuries of denial based on the fallacy of *terra nullius* – the premise of an "empty land". Australia's first Aboriginal law graduate, Professor Irene Watson articulates that the "mechanism of terra nullius provided the legitimacy which imperial Britain needed to 'lawfully settle' our lands and dispossess First Nations from our way of being in relation to the earth in the place now called Australia" (2014, p.508). Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer Teela Reid in 2020 challenged Australians to "embark on a reckoning with the truth of its past," instead of the notion of Reconciliation. But Reid (2020) warns:

... it will take a brave nation ... to grapple with the truth of its history and enact the structural change necessary to elevate the ancient voices of First Nations. (...) Reckoning requires everyday folks to bring about bold change, whereas reconciliation has developed a fraught application in the Australian context. (p. 1)

Reckoning and Performance

Also calling for bold change, non-Indigenous theatre director Rachael Swain (2020) has proposed that in the context of dance and performance, we can no longer “feign to exist as unsituated subjectivities” (p. 10). Swain (2020) challenges:

(...) settler dance artists to understand that a subjectivity without an attachment to land in Australia should not be accepted as the status quo or something neutral. Instead, this can be understood as an active brutal stance, deeply informed by the white blindness and institutionalised national racism that sustain colonialism. (pp. 10-11.)

I agree with Swain that this engagement from the perspective of a settler artist cannot or should not be neutral or innocent. As I have argued elsewhere (Taylor, 2010), we are not “empty” bodies that can respond to place from a stance of impartial externality: we are implicated in the devastating effects colonisation has had on Indigenous peoples and their Country. I suggest that live, place-focused performance events can contribute to this reckoning.

Renowned Australian performance artist, Jill Orr stated: “Given that we (colonisers) have taken all the space, the least we can do is open up a space in our performance structures for Aboriginal people to tell their own story” (2009, p. 2). As a non-Indigenous curator, I need to work with, build and maintain strong relationships with First Nations artists and communities. I aim to create platforms within my projects for Indigenous knowledge holders to share what they are willing to share, because I deeply value their knowledge from millennia of living sustainably with Country and believe it is necessary for any project about place to centre First Nations’ perspectives.

Curating Performance on Country

By offering experiences that are consciously situated not just in place, but on Country, I aim to foster in audiences a sense of place that engages with Indigenous relationships to Country, the complexities of settler colonialism, and the layers of cultural diversity that characterise the place known as Australia today.

Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul was a site-responsive program of performances, workshops, public art and walks at Mount Dandenong, thirty kilometres east of Melbourne. The curatorial model began with its name: by using the barely known Indigenous place name, *Corhanwarrabul*, it aimed to encourage a sense of Country. The program foregrounded *Wurundjeri* dance alongside other performing artists’ responses to place, emphasising that Indigenous dance was indeed the first *site-specific* performance.

The Dandenong Ranges have long been characterised by quaint European-looking townships amongst the forest, where tourists (still to this day) visit from Melbourne for their weekend “ Devonshire teas .” Signage along walking tracks refers to the pioneering enterprises of early colonists in the 1800s, but there is little or no public signage¹ acknowledging the Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri people, let alone mention of colonial processes of dispossession.

To open *Dancing Place: Corhanwarrabul* program, Wurundjeri ngurungaeta (senior elder), Murrundindi performed a Welcome to Country ceremony and guided us on a walk sharing his knowledge of bush foods and plant uses. Wurundjeri women's dance group Djirri Djirri performed cultural dances and led a workshop that all attendees participated in, dancing in a circle on top of the mountain, where it is thought corroborees (ceremonies) once took place (Figure 1). This was a profound, shared, embodied experience on Country for locals, visitors and Traditional Owners alike.

Figure 1

Djirri Djirri Wurundjeri dance workshop (presided over by Murrundindi), Mt Corhanwarrabul, 2020. Image credit: Laki Sideris.



¹ The lack of signage acknowledging First Nations presence is in a process of being rectified at the time of writing, with the implementation of ngurrak barring public art trail (formerly titled RidgeWalk), a project of Yarra Ranges Council.

Artists of Environmental Performance Authority (EPA) guided audiences along forest paths to witness site-responsive performances, and between performances EPA engaged audience-participants in sensory activities to deepen their experience of the surroundings. In uncanny contrast to these activities, EPA concluded the tour with a picnic of scones with jam and cream at the very location where Murrundindi had welcomed us to Country at the start of the event. Bustling in and covering the ground with white lacey tablecloths and picnic baskets, a performer with an English accent calling out “Welcome to the countryside!”, the picnic was an absurdist mirroring of how settlers had colonised the hills, with scant regard for the existing Country and culture. This uncomfortably comic scene gently implicated our mainly Anglo-Australian audience, exposing the colonists’ ignorance, entitlement and forced erasure of Indigenous peoples that typifies colonial habitation.

Many Anglo Australian artists are currently engaging with the injustice and violence of colonial histories in our work (see Spiers & Criddle, 2024). As I have also written about in more depth elsewhere (2025), some of us are realising that it is our task – a kind of transgenerational labour – to reckon with the present that we have inherited from our forebears and have created from that past. As site-responsive artists and curators in Australia, revealing and remembering these histories and inhabiting that discomfort with our audiences is one way of contributing to the national Truth-telling project (see M. Davis, 2022). I propose that inhabiting these complex realisations through performance – in situ – lends potency to their impact.

Revealing, Towards Belonging

Ideally these projects, as well as curating professional artists, also involve local community groups. In 2017 I curated a screen dance project in Melbourne’s suburban far west, *Dancing Place: Wyndham*, with over seventy diverse community members across generational and cultural divides. Some of the groups were new immigrants, performing their cultural dances in sites of their choice in the area they now called home, to an audience that comprised their new community. They were “at once expressing locatedness, declaring presence, and in a process of thickening their experience of habitus” (Taylor, 2017, p. 8). If to “belong” means to fit in or be inter-related, I propose that dancing in a place can be a literal process of physicalising belonging.

I would like to extend that involvement towards phenomenological belonging to the audience-participants who attend live place-responsive events on Country. Bringing local people and visitors together and curating artists to reveal the place through their varied lenses can powerfully foster collective locational identity. Site-responsive performance can unveil or bring attention to layers of place, features or atmospheres that audiences may not otherwise

notice. Via the haptic, kinaesthetic, imaginative and conceptually interrogative engagement that the artists invite, audiences become more conscious of their individual and collective embodied presence in the place. Being there – immersed, amongst, involved – generates a personal, subjective relationship with the surrounding world that is felt through the body.

Locating, Towards Complex Presence

In this time of urgent need for radical change to a relationship of care for the environments that we are part of, it is salient to take the lead from First Peoples whose philosophy and practice has always prioritised care and dialogic reciprocity with Country, towards becoming present in our bodies and places.

I have referred to my dance practice as *locating* – a mode of listening and responding through my body to the place, to acquaint with it, towards becoming present (2008). Locating acknowledges that this process is complex and ongoing, and that to be honestly present in Australia we need to face the truth of our colonial history.

Curating place-based events is a way of trying to share the locating dance in a broader sense. Through listening in the present and sensing-with the community-ecology of human and non-human components that collectively comprise the place: Country, we linger together in the necessary discomfort of reckoning with the past, learn and wonder from others' perspectives, and – hopefully – navigate ways forward.

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